

The Exploding Ivory: Some Reflections on Narrative in Jane Austen.

By Louisa Dubery

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This article is a transcript of an informal talk given to a group of Winchester Cathedral guides as part of a series of talks during the winter of 2017-2018.

Introduction

Jane Austen's narrative art, as you may know, is famously likened to a piece of ivory. It is an image used extensively in the critical literature to embody the delicate, miniaturist nature of her work: its small, intimate scale, its fine texture, the closely crafted structure, the meticulously worked prose style. Admirers use the image to commend her writing. Detractors use it to complain: for example, that she never looked out of the windows of her own social world of the English country gentry to the Napoleonic wars beyond.¹

I am going to start by looking at the ivory image. Then move onto some reflections: on context and on style. Finally, I am going to suggest that in the end the ivory becomes quite exploded, like Bunbury, and consider why that might have happened. The explosion includes the verses about St. Swithun, patron saint of Winchester Cathedral.

I should add that my hypothesis assumes that Austen died of Addison's disease. While necessarily inconclusive, this has been generally recognised following an article published in the British Medical Journal in 1964.² The article is based upon the hyperpigmentation Austen is thought to have suffered. Hyperpigmentation is symptomatic of Addison's, caused by the excessive signalling from the pituitary gland to the adrenal glands as they lose the ability to respond by producing cortisol.

The Ivory Image

Starting with the ivory image, it originates in Jane Austen herself, for it arose first in a letter she wrote to her nephew, James Edward Austen-Leigh. He had mislaid some of his own writing, and she joked that she could not have misappropriated it for,

'I do not think....that any theft of that sort would really be very useful to me. What should I do with your strong, manly, vigorous sketches, full of

variety and glow. How could I possibly join them on to the little bit (two inches wide) of ivory on which I work with so fine a brush?’³

She was referring to her tiny pocket book with leaves made of ivory. On these, she made pencil notes, erasing them once transferred into her permanent writing. By a sort of legerdemain, the two inches of ivory became an image to visualise the qualities of her narrative art. I always think it more evocative of her lifestyle. You can just imagine her, can't you, pausing and reaching into her pocket to scribble a note as it came into her head while she was preoccupied with housework or with custody of the nephews and nieces or with everything else.

Narrative Context: The Intellectual Revolution

In turning now to narrative, I start with context. Context is always important because nothing happens in a vacuum. But with Austen, I think context is essential to understanding because her style is so highly allusive. And most of what she alludes to is out of our sight today. It is also worth remembering that her first novel was not published until she was 35, and she died when she was 41; so for nearly all of her writing life her audience was her family and friends. And of course they all shared the same framework of reference, so did not require explanation.

The forces that shaped Austen's narrative context were powerful. She wrote at the time of an intellectual revolution. And she was in the midst of it. Remember that from the beginning, during her childhood at the rectory in Steventon, she was highly literate. Jane Austen's brother, Henry, published the posthumous novels, and in his *Biographical Notice* attached to them he wrote,

‘Her reading was very extensive....and her memory extremely tenacious....It is difficult to say at what age she was not intimately acquainted with the merits and defects of the best essays and novels in the English language....’⁴

She would have absorbed the ideas of the intellectual revolution by osmosis, as they were played out in eighteenth century literature.

So what was this intellectual revolution? Well, Austen was born in the period we call the ‘Age of Reason’, when educated thought was governed by the principles of rationality. It is important in appreciating Austen to understand the great and longstanding importance of reason. Eighteenth century reason was descended from Renaissance humanism. The humanist idea was not simply that humanity is distinguished by its power of connected thought, but also that reason was the means by which the entire world order was maintained. In the Elizabethan world picture, reason reached far beyond the cognitive to the metaphysical. Lear's madness, personified by the storm, arises because he upset the natural order by acting irrationally, thereby casting the elements into chaos.⁵ By the eighteenth century, Austen's time, reason had become idealist,

the transcendent means of grasping first principles: the very engine of the Enlightenment.

Then, came the revolt against reason, the Romantic movement. Romanticism is based upon sensibility. Sensibility means to perceive or feel through the physical senses.⁶ It is diametrically opposed to reason. The intellectual revolution is between these two cognitive forces, or ways of thinking, of being.

Austen was a rationalist. Her underlying theme is her attack on the priority sensibility gives to emotion, passion and impulse, as against conduct governed by reason. Sensibility, by centering on the physical rather than on sense (or the intellect), develops a proud and prejudiced mind; a mind incapable of mental flexibility and amenity to persuasion.

The way Austen communicates the intellectual revolution in narrative is through the medium of each character's consciousness. In the speech and conduct of her heroines – Elinor Dashwood, Elizabeth Bennet, Anne Elliott – we see how a well regulated mind results ultimately in happiness, although reason is a harsh discipline and its austerity causes hardship along the way. In the opposite characters, we see how sensibility, being physical, brings immediate gratification, but also how it sparks a trail of trouble and misery, and never endures. Again because it is physical, Austen marks the crisis point by some kind of actual catastrophe, such as Marianne's illness over the dastardly Willoughby in *Sense and Sensibility*,⁷ or Louisa Musgrove's accident on the Cobbe in *Persuasion*.⁸

Austen explores different ways of attacking sensibility in each novel. The theme is most obvious of course in her first published novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, where actuality, or sense, and illusion, or sensibility, are played out in the antithetical relationship between the Dashwood sisters, Marianne the romantic and Elinor the rationalist.⁹ For example, when Marianne criticises Mrs. Jennings for her vulgarity, wholly excluding her kind nature, Elinor remonstrates against,

‘...the injustice to which her sister was often led in her opinion of others, by the.....refinement of her own mind, and the too great importance placed by her on the delicacies of a strong sensibility....’¹⁰

This misjudgement of people by Marianne, her impetuous judgment, stems from her romantic myopia. Sensibility is illusory, so it allows Willoughby to manipulate her very easily, for illusory qualities are readily fabricated. But equally, illusion has no substance, and soon fades, revealing the true Willoughby.

Now, I expect you're thinking, "All right, but Sensibility isn't just a set of social mannerisms. Wordsworth didn't arrive at naturalism or Coleridge at mysticism by appropriating certain personal qualities practised by a certain sector of society." But sensibility is simply a means of perception, and it takes many forms. In any case, I am far from suggesting that Austen was ever interested

in cognitive dissonance *per se*. As in her novels, her interest in the intellectual revolution was confined to her own world, and so how that world was affected by it.

The World of the Novel

So, thinking now about what did Austen's world, the world of the novelist, look like? Well, of course it was very new. The novel was novel. It and Austen were born in the same century. The dominant prose forms had been the essay and the pamphlet, *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*. They were about fact. When we added imagination to fact, the novel was born. That was arguably in *Robinson Crusoe*, the imaginative embellishment of a real life story, by the journalist, Daniel Defoe.¹¹

Today, we take novels for granted, and it is easy to forget the urgency of the questions that in literary circles during the eighteenth century surrounded its emergence as a new prose genre. "What is its purpose?" and "How is its existence to be validated?". Essentially, those questions meant "How is this new imagination to be deployed?". The answer, ultimately and definitively from Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), was that the plausible form of novels ideally suited them to promote the moral good. He called novels 'Lectures of Conduct.' The idea was that the novelist must engage the reader's imagination with heroes whose well regulated conduct resulted in their success. Therefore, the reader would emulate that conduct. Johnson wrote,

'These Books are written...to...serve as Lectures of Conduct...Spectators fix their Eyes upon [the hero]...and hope by observing his Behaviour and Success to regulate their own Practices...If the Power of Example is so great, as to take Possession of the Memory by a kind of Violence, and produce Effects almost without the Intervention of the Will, Care ought to be taken, that...the best Examples only should be exhibited.'¹²

This early moral conception of the novel is scarcely surprising when we remember that literacy was a privilege. Until well into the nineteenth century, most people read not to escape from their lives (as is often the case with the modern novel), but to improve their lives.¹³ Reading and literature were not merely casual, but the means of education. It followed that popular literature should be for the moral good. The Reverend George Austen, Austen's father, who tutored many pupils at Steventon, would almost certainly have drawn up lists of desirable reading for her from his extensive library. And in *Emma*, when Emma wishes to reinvent her longsuffering friend Harriet Smith ('a girl who wanted only a little more knowledge and elegance to be quite perfect'¹⁴), she sets about

'...improving her little friend's mind, by a great deal of useful reading....'¹⁵

Henry, in the *Biographical Notice*, describes Johnson as Austen's favourite moral writer, and she is clearly in Johnson's tradition. We see his classical school in her syntax as much as in her ideology.¹⁶ But by Austen's time, a fiendish and most unJohnsonian wind had swirled into the world of the novel: the Gothic Romance. These were tales of horror and mystery, featuring dark forests, gothic ruins, dungeons and black veils. They are a particular exercise of sensibility, drawing on its expression in landscape where the picturesque, or the sublime, is portrayed as mystery bordering on terror.¹⁷

Austen saw gothic romances as polluting the new novel genre. *Northanger Abbey* is a burlesque (that is, a mimicry for the purpose of mockery), on Mrs. Radcliffe's gothic romance, *Mysteries of Udolpho*.¹⁸ Catherine Morland's ambition in life is to become a gothic romantic heroine. She sets about a training programme, and her friend, Isabella Thorpe, gives her a reading list, assuring her it comprises the finest of 'horrid' (i.e. horror) novels.¹⁹ The burlesque is plain: remember Emma's reading list for Harriet.

Austen was additionally appalled by gothic romances because she already feared that the novel was seen as the poor relation to the essay and the pamphlet. They were edifying prose forms that served to put into common currency the appropriate standards of taste and conduct. It was imperative to Austen that the novel should compete morally. In *Northanger Abbey*, she wrote,

'....while.....a paper from the *Spectator*....[is] eulogised by a thousand pens, - there seems almost a general wish of decrying the capacity and undervaluing the labour of the novelist.'²⁰

Reason was key to achieve the moral high ground.

Narrative Method: The Novelists's Problem

I want now to shift the focus of our reflections to you: the reader. The novelist found he had a problem that the essay or pamphlet writer did not have. The novel is not normally read at a single sitting, as the pamphlet and essay could be. Therefore, the novelist must develop a continuing relationship with the reader. He must find some way to command and retain your attention. He has only his story to do this for him, so it will depend on his narrative method, on the way that he tells the story. There are different ways of doing this. Most commonly, he communicates directly. Let's take the beginning of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* as an example.

'Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker and the chief mourner....Old Marley was as dead as a doornail.'

Do you see how Dickens immediately arrests and controls his reader? This is direct communication. It is didactic. I am the writer; you are the reader. We are on opposite sides of the words. My words. Austen does not do this. She communicates indirectly. This means the reader must realise for himself what she is communicating. Compare *A Christmas Carol* with another beginning. This is from *Persuasion*:

‘Sir Walter Elliot, of Kellynch-hall, in Somersetshire, was a man who, for his own amusement, never took up any book but the Baronetage; there he found occupation for an idle hour, and consolation in a distressed one;...this was the page at which the favourite volume always opened: ELLIOT of KELLYNCH-HALL’²¹

Now we know from that absolutely, at once, what Austen wants us to know: that Sir Walter is vain, trivial, foolish. But she has not said it in this passage. She has said only enough for us to realise it, to see it, to experience it, for ourselves. Her method is experiential, not didactic. Dickens always tells us the story of his imagination. But Austen always calls on our own imagination. We complete what she tells us in our imagination. Remember the critical question, “What is to be the role of imagination in the early novel?”. This is Austen’s response.

Let’s consider briefly the effect of her narrative method. It is experiential: we are participating in her narrative. We are experiencing it, rather than simply reading it like we read narrative in Dickens. This is powerful because the air of confiding, of sharing the narrative, generates a special kind of closeness between the reader and Austen. Perhaps this method of communication grew out of the years of intimacy of writing for family and friends. But even if it did not, the effect for the reader is the same. He, and probably without ever realising quite why, comes to feel he has some special connection to Jane Austen, almost in fact, as if he was a member of her first audience.

Much as anyone might enjoy Dickens, you won’t feel this same connection; his narrative method does not work to invite the same response in the reader.²² When you combine Austen’s method with humour, as she so often did, as we see in our Sir Walter example, this feeling of special connection grows stronger. It is no wonder that, when we ask our visitors if they would like to visit Jane Austen, they almost always respond warmly.²³

The Ivory Explodes

Let’s move on now to our last point, the explosion, including the verses about Swithun. Called *Venta*, written on St Swithun’s Day 1817, the verses express the saint’s anger that the people of Winchester have gone to the races instead of observing his holy day. He curses them with rain. Here are two verses

‘Oh, subjects rebellious, Oh Venta depraved
When once we are buried you think we are dead

But behold me Immortal. - By vice you're enslaved
You have sinned and must suffer.- Then further he said

These races & revels & dissolute measures
With which you're debasing a neighbouring Plain
Let them stand - you shall meet with your curse in your pleasures
Set off for your course, I'll pursue with my rain.'²⁴

Well. Would you ever think that was by Austen? The ivory is quite exploded.
There are none of its qualities in *Venta*.

Venta was discovered in a collection of Austen relics sold at auction in 1948. Chapman, the authoritative Austen editor, thought that James Austen, Jane's brother, must have composed it. He visited her in her last days at her lodgings in College Street, Winchester. James also wrote verse and Chapman thought the handwriting looked like his. Oddly, Chapman does not seem to have considered, so soon before Austen's death, that *Venta* was probably dictated. But anyway, as Chapman further notes, Henry includes the poem in his *Biographical Notice*, which suggests it is by Jane, although it is not in the *Memoir*²⁵ or the *Letters*.²⁶ Henry says it all in the *Biographical Notice* when he describes the verses as being 'replete with fancy and vigour.'²⁷ I can't help worrying about what Austen would have thought of that. It sounds horribly like sensibility.

Now, perhaps we can explain *Venta* as a rage for immortality in the face of death, a sort of 'Do not go gently into that good night.' But I think it is also interesting to consider relative to the nature of her illness. Sir Vincent Zachary Cope, in a British Medical Journal article entitled 'Jane Austen's Last Illness', said that she

'...did something more than write excellent novels – she also described the first recorded case of Addison's disease....'²⁸

But he meant the record of physical illness in the letters. No-one, as far as I know, has looked at her work in terms of the cognitive effect of falling cortisol levels.

Her last novel was *Sanditon*, started in January 1817 and left unfinished in March. Austen scholars say it shows the lassitude of ill health. With respect, I feel that is inaccurate: there are twelve densely written chapters, highly charged like *Venta*, devoid of paragraphs. The compulsion to write must have been very strong. What the narrative does show, and tragically because it is so striking, is that in its density it loses all of those delicate, elegant and so clever ivory qualities. The mastery of dialogue, of idiom, of mannerism - think of Miss Bates in *Emma* - is replaced by blank comments with one character's voice barely distinguishable from another.²⁹ The beautifully turned sentences become short and abrupt, disjointed by crude hyphenated punctuation; the humour that so elegantly relieved Austen's critical apprehension of sharpness becomes at best farce. Sir Edward resolves to seduce Clara.

‘He knew his Business. Already he had many Musings on the Subject....he must naturally wish to strike out something new, to exceed those who had gone before him - and he felt a strong curiosity to ascertain whether the Neighbourhood of Tombuctoo might not afford some solitary House adapted for Clara’s reception; - but the Expense alas ! of Measures in that masterly style was ill-suited to his Purse, & Prudence obliged him to prefer the quietest sort of ruin and disgrace for the object of his Affections....’³⁰

The meticulously crafted lightness, so well illustrated by the shared narrative experience, is gone; the style is as heavy as Sir Edward’s own blunderings.

Rather than showing lassitude, I suggest that *Sanditon* is boom writing; that is, the periods of frenetic energy that are followed by periods of ‘bust’, as the cortisol rhythm becomes increasingly erratic and the body becomes unable to manage stress, the calls made upon it by writing. And Cassandra wrote, observing her sister immediately following the composition of *Vent*,

‘....there was a visible change’.³¹

Tragically, this time, Austen did not recover.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let’s go back to the true ivory, the pocket book. I suggested how to me it evokes Austen herself but most of all the extent to which she lived in her mind, transferring its bright lights to the ivory leaves as she set about her daily tasks. We hear about the physical effects of adrenal insufficiency, but as cortisol levels fall, there is a very real effect on the finer edges of the mind: the brain fog, the anxiety, the low stress tolerance, the inability to think clearly, the problems with short term memory, with connected thought. Ironically, it interferes exactly with all the fine tuning of eighteenth century Reason.

Falling cortisol, then, affects all the things of which the ivory was made, and I do not see how Austen could possibly have sustained the ivory qualities – even long before she had to stop writing.

My reflections on Austen that you have kindly let me share with you are really Austen’s own; how she reflected the intellectual world in her writing, how she reflected the imaginative narrative experience onto the reader. And finally, most poignantly, the reflection which she may never have seen; the way her last works mirror the cognitive effects of her illness. Perhaps there is room to look more deeply into this last reflection. After all, she has left us a unique record.

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30.03.2018

Notes

¹ Jane Austen wrote to her niece that '...3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on.' Quoted in David Nokes, (1997), *Jane Austen*, Fourth Estate, p56.

² Sir Vincent Zachary Cope, [July 1964], 'Jane Austen's Last Illness', *BMJ*, pp182-185. See further, David Nokes, (1997), *Jane Austen*, Fourth Estate, p558.

³ RW Chapman (ed), (1959), *Jane Austen's Letters to her Sister Cassandra and Others*, London: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed, p299.

⁴ Henry Austen, *Biographical Notice of the Author* prefixed to *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion* (1818) reprinted in RW Chapman (ed), (1989), *The Novels of Jane Austen: The Text Based on Collation of the Early Editions*, Vol IV, *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion*, London: Oxford University Press, 3rd ed., p7. All references to Jane Austen's novels are taken from the 1989 reprinting of the standard edition of her works by RW Chapman (1923-1969).

⁵ This is evident in the way Lear's famous first speech in the storm emphasises the elements in turmoil (air, earth, fire and water), more than the actual weather. It is the speech that begins "Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!...." See *King Lear*, Act III, ii.

⁶ 'Sensibility' or the 'new sentimentalism' is established by the mid eighteenth century. See further on meaning, R Williams, (1976), *Keywords*, Fontana, p235.

⁷ *Sense and Sensibility* was begun as a novel in 1797 and published in 1811. When reading Austen, the periods of composition are obviously more important than the dates of publication. This enables the gradual evolution of narrative elements to be traced, culminating in *Persuasion*, with its more subtle, complex, interwoven portrayal of human relations and themes.

⁸ *Persuasion* was begun in 1815 and published in 1818.

⁹ The antithetical approach arguably over exposes the theme in *Sense and Sensibility*, perhaps because it originally took an epistolary form (*Elinor and Marianne*).

¹⁰ *Sense and Sensibility*, Vol I, Chapter XXXI, p201.

¹¹ Daniel Defoe (1660?-1731) published in 1719 *Robinson Crusoe*. It is based on the story of Alexander Selkirk, who ran away to sea and was on the island from 1704-1709. Defoe embellished his residence there with many imagined incidents.

¹² Samuel Johnson (31 March 1750), *Rambler*, No 4, in Arthur Murphy (ed), (1840), *The Works of Samuel Johnson*, Vol I, New York: Blake, p18. See also Samuel Richardson (1689-1751) in affirmation of this genre.

¹³ The transition of the novel into the 'social novels' of the 1840s may be within this genesis.

¹⁴ *Emma*, Vol IV, Chapter III, p 23. *Emma* was begun in 1814 and published in 1815.

¹⁵ *Emma*, Vol IV, Chapter IX, p69.

¹⁶ Henry Austen writes of Jane Austen's moral ideology: 'Johnson, whose thought coloured her view of life,' *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion*, Vol V, p7. An example of Austen's classical prose style is as follows: 'To his wife he was very little otherwise indebted, than as her ignorance and folly had contributed to his amusement. This is not the sort of happiness which a man would in general wish to owe to his wife, but where other powers of entertainment are wanting, the true philosopher will benefit from such as are given.' *Pride and Prejudice*, Vol II, Chapter XLII, p236.

¹⁷ The gothic romance can be related to parallel developments in landscape painting from the 1750s, when paintings portray frightening, wild and sublime scenery; for example, Ibbetson's 'Phaeton in a Thunderstorm' of 1798. Again, the contrast with Austen's narrative art is marked. Landscape seldom features, and when it does, it is often as an extension of a character's consciousness, not for its own sake. A good illustration is *Persuasion*, Vol IV, Chapter X , p85.

¹⁸ Ann Radcliffe (1764-1823). *Mysteries of Udolpho* was published in 1794. *Northanger Abbey* was begun in 1797. There is a helpful review of how Austen drew on *Udolpho* in *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion* Vol V, p306.

¹⁹ *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion*, Vol V, Chapter VI, p40.

²⁰ *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion*, Vol V, Chapter V, p37.

²¹ *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion*, Vol V, Chapter I, p3.

²² This is why the spirit of Dickens transfers easily to film form; his narrative is 'whole' and can be easily lifted. The elusiveness in Austen's narrative method means it is difficult for Austen films to replicate the real spirit of the novels. Their success lies often in the attractiveness of aspects to which Austen may not have attached the same priority.

²³ In Austen's strength lies also her vulnerability, since her narrative method depends on reader response. See Mark Twain, for example, who famously said of a library in *Following the Equator*, 'Jane Austen's books areabsent....Just that one omission alone would make a fairly good library out of a library that hadn't a book in it.' Quoted in E Auerbach, (Winter 1999), 'A Barkeeper Entering the Kingdom of Heaven: Did Mark Twain Really Hate Jane Austen?', *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Vol 75. Twain is infuriated by what he sees as the politeness in Austen's work. Interestingly, Johnson said that all literature that describes manners requires notes seventy years later; certainly understanding context is particularly important in Austen.

²⁴ *Venta, Written at Winchester on Tuesday the 15th July 1817. Minor Works*, Vol VI, p451.

²⁵ JE Austen-Leigh, (1870), *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, London.

²⁶ RA Austen-Leigh and W Austen-Leigh, (1913), *Jane Austen: Her Life and Letters*, London.

²⁷ See RW Chapman's editorial note, *Minor Works*, Vol VI, p451.

²⁸ Sir Vincent Zachary Cope, (July 1964), 'Jane Austen's Last Illness', BMJ, pp182-185.

²⁹ Austen's mastery of dialogue and its connection to narrative are well illustrated by Miss Bates' endearing idiosyncrasies of speech. For example, *Emma*, Vol IV, Chapter IX, p236. Austen's characters use the same language, irrespective of social standing; the skill lies in how she communicates narrative through the different use of the same language by different characters.

³⁰ *Minor Works*, Vol VI, Chapter 8, p405.

³¹ Quoted in David Nokes, (1997), *Jane Austen*, Fourth Estate, p518.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank Julie Adams, Editor, for her assistance and support. Needless to say, any inaccuracies are my own.